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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the way teachers make use of and work on theory to disrupt and ultimately improve everyday educational practice. The paper argues that teachers working on and with theory can and do generate new forms of educative practices in the field of literacy education, which are based on explicit standpoints towards social justice in specific localities such as diverse and low socioeconomic communities. To make this case and to illustrate particular practices and effects, the paper draws briefly on the author's own history as a teacher-researcher in the 1970s, but mostly it refers to subsequent collaborative research with teachers and the work of two teacher-researchers. According to the paper, use of the phrase "teachers working on and with theory" signals the preference to avoid theory/practice dichotomies generally and also suggests the importance of teacher agency in regards to the production and use of theories. The paper is informed by multiple theories, assembled over time in different professional roles and relationships to research-models of action research and teacher research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), Foucault's (1983, 1984) constitutive theory of discourse, feminist theories of teachers' work (Acker, 1995; Weiler, 1988), and Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977, 1990). (Contains 27 references.) (NKA)

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Making use of theories about literacy and justice: Teachers re-searching practice

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Theory/Practice Dilemmas in educational research: reassessing our research stances on literacy, gender, policy and new forms of theory
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This paper explores the ways teachers make use of and work on theory to disrupt and ultimately improve everyday educational practice. I argue that teachers working on and with theory can and do generate new forms of educative practices in the field of literacy education, which are based on explicit standpoints towards social justice in specific localities. To make this case and to illustrate particular practices and effects, I draw briefly on my own history as a teacher, indeed as a teacher-researcher in the seventies; but mostly I refer to subsequent collaborative research with teachers and the work of two teacher-researchers. In using the phrase 'teachers working on and with theory', I am signaling my preference to avoid theory/practice dichotomies generally and also to suggest the importance of teacher agency in regards to the production and use of theories. This paper is informed by multiple theories, assembled over time in different professional roles and relationships to research. Those which I have made use of in my work with teacher researchers include models of action research and teacher research (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988), Foucault's (1983 1984) constitutive theory of discourse, feminist theories of teachers' work (Acker 1995; Weiler 1988), and more recently I am exploring Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Grenfell & James 1998).

In writing this, I do as many teachers do, that is, theorise my practice as a researcher and educator, by analysing the historical and contemporary narratives of my work. Taking up Foucault's insight that discourse is constitutive I consider the discourses which have produced teacher-researchers, including myself, since the seventies. In working as a teacher-researcher in the late seventies and with teacher-researchers since the mid-eighties, I have held on to an optimistic view that educational research could lead to educational reform which might lead to the negotiation of social justice in particular school communities. I hold on to that optimism for local change, informed by a poststructuralist skepticism, even now, despite the many important warnings of the impossibility of educational reform on a large scale.

Teachers must be in the forefront of theorising what can be changed in schools and with what effects for different students (Brodkey 1992). The mediation of theory in teacher education and teachers' work on and with theory are urgent research sites for literacy educators committed to making a difference for disadvantaged students.

> The future of literacy education and research on literacy, however, relies not on language theorists, not on researchers, not even on teachers as researchers, but on teachers knowing theories and assessing their value on research on literacy. (Brodkey 1992, p.307)

Brodkey goes on to argue that 'teachers need to recover their right to conceptualise teaching and learning and hence to reform education from within' (Brodkey 1992, p.308) and suggests that ongoing analysis of the constitutive nature of discourse offers possibilities for interrupting discursive practices that are counter-productive to teaching and learning (Brodkey 1992). As a researcher who works with teacher-researchers, my task is to consider how I might anticipate with teachers the different effects of our practices on different groups of students and which evaluative frames are useful in considering the effects of practices.

In South Australia a very strong tradition of teacher-research exists, historically emanating from many sources, which overlapped and amplified the effects of each other and in effect build a discursive field around 'teacher research'. In the seventies, the language across the curriculum movement was pioneered in South Australia by Garth Boomer. He emphasised the intellectual work of teachers and the need for them to theorise their practice. This continued into the eighties with the influence of process-writing researchers (Calkins 1986; Graves 1983) and advocates of kid-watching and teacher inquiry (Jaggar & Smith-Burke 1985). Simultaneously, the Early Literacy In-service Course built mini teacher research practices – between unit activities – into its professional development model for teachers. The Commonwealth-funded Disadvantaged Schools Program was built around a model of teacher-driven action research projects. Carr & Kemmis had published their Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research (1986) and a widely used guide for doing action research was also produced (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988).

When I began teaching at the University in the mid 1980s, I had already done classroom and community research as a teacher and one of my first tasks was to put together a teacher-as-researcher unit. As well as the specific unit, most of the course was based around this model and typically teachers conducted classroom, work or community-based inquiries as a part of each subject in their course work. By the nineties in South Australia in-service courses conducted by the department of education and by the universities in language and literacy teacher research became standard, rather than unusual practice. My point here is that teacher-research and action research had become part of the common professional discourse of teachers. With its familiarity, there were risks that its radical, disruptive and critical agendas for educational reform might be lost; that it might become simply a technical activity about methods and strategies; that teachers might become data collectors for bureaucratic purposes and so on. My colleagues and I have been very much aware of the critiques and warnings around action research. We are keen to preserve the emphasis on action research as political, theorised practice.

In this brief paper I consider now how literacy teachers have worked with and on theory to knowingly disrupt their everyday practices as they research different ways of teaching literacy in diverse and low socio-economic communities. I discuss the work of two teacher-researchers who explicitly work with theories of literacy and theories of justice and I outline my own standpoint and dilemmas on theory/practice dilemmas in educational research.

Teachers who work with and on theory

In this section I outline what I mean by 'teachers who work with and on theory', why it is necessary to specify this, and why theory isn't a given of 'research' when teachers undertake it. I refer here to the research of two teachers, Jennifer O'Brien and Bronwyn Parkin.

O'Brien is an experienced teacher-researcher who has recently retired from classroom teaching and now, in her fifties, is working on her doctoral dissertation about what she

describes as 'teacher-collaborators'. She has published many papers in collaboration with academics and as a single author, as well as co-authoring a book for teachers. O'Brien acts a mentor in the teacher-researcher network, which I describe below. Parkin has conducted a number of small-scale action-research studies in her career. In 1998 she completed an extended piece of classroom research for her Masters degree and now in 1999 she has moved onto a commonwealth government funded school-based research project. She has published several papers and increasingly presents at conferences for teachers and educational researchers. Currently she juggles part-time teaching and caring for her young children; later we anticipate that she may go on to do a research degree. She is an active teacher-researcher in the network.

I can only highlight and illustrate here the complex and developmental nature of these two women teacher-researchers, though I hope to conduct at some point an extended longitudinal study of teacher-researchers, as I believe as a profession we know relatively little about this aspect of teachers' careers and what it contributes to the educational research community.

Jennifer O'Brien conducted a number of related studies over a period of several years, investigating how early childhood teachers might negotiate a critical literacy curriculum with young children. Working directly with feminist and poststructuralist theories about the construction of gender, the critiques of socially critical researchers of school literacies and theories of social justice, she sought to disrupt her pedagogical practices and to re-build them differently. In the opening chapter, entitled 'Theory/Research/Practice Nexus', of her Masters thesis, she writes:

> In this chapter I review the critically-based literature, linking theory, research and pedagogical change which inspired me to introduce a critical discourse analysis into my junior primary classroom; at the same time I discuss how the poststructuralist prediction of multiplicity, confusion, contradiction and possibility impacted on my research and pedagogical positions. (O'Brien 1994c p.1)

Making use of feminist, critical discourse analytic and poststructuralist theories in her everyday classroom practices, O'Brien changed the questions she asked about texts to indicate the constructedness of texts and the gendered representations in texts designed for children and for wider use in the community. Influenced by cultural studies, O'Brien also changed the kinds of texts she used in the classroom and began to incorporate everyday texts such as the junk mail put out by department stores and the spin-off materials associated with television programs and movies which children read at home. Informed by educational research that suggested that teachers controlled most of the talk around texts and thereby ensured their own authorised readings, she changes the rules and the everyday practices around who could speak about the texts and when. This meant that children were able to comment uninvited as O'Brien read to them. As well, O'Brien avoided asking all the questions and evaluating each of the children's comments. She also changed the associated writing and drawing she asked children to do in order for children to write and draw from the position of text analysis. O'Brien summarises:

> I aimed to raise with my students questions about the versions of the social world, particularly the inequities in gender relations, constructed in and by their classroom texts. I decided to problematise the authority relations between teacher and students which resulted in the teacher's textual reading being preferred to that of her students. (O'Brien, 1994c, p.4)

As she made these changes, she deliberately took up the insights of theorists and researchers and simultaneously she researched the effects of her changed practices from a critical feminist standpoint. She considered for example the different responses of boys and girls to the new literacies she was making available. These complex changes to practice are the result of considerable intellectual work with a repertoire of theories assembled in professional development provided by the education of girls unit, graduate studies in language and literacy, attendance at national and local conferences, and O'Brien's own extensive self-directed reading.

The story of O'Brien's research is beyond what I can hope to discuss in this paper. Indeed she is working on analytical account of her own history as part of her dissertation (O'Brien 1994c). Readers may wish to follow up O'Brien's writing through the references provided (1994a, 1994b). I want now to summarise the theories O'Brien was working with and some of the effects of O'Brien's practices as a teacher-researcher. In changing her practices, O'Brien was simultaneously working with, and articulate about, theories about feminism, poststructuralism, classroom discourse, popular culture, social justice, critical literacy and more. As she explains in her dissertation:

> I take a position as critical practitioner/researcher/student, looking back at the issues raised for me in feminist poststructuralist theory, feminist poststructuralist pedagogy. I reflect on how the action I took in my classroom was interwoven with my continued reading in my area of interest. At the same time I point to gaps I uncovered in theory and practice and show how I drew on a theory/practices nexus to investigate some of these gaps. (O'Brien, 1994c, p.1)

As an experienced teacher she had assembled and worked on an ensemble of theories that she made use of in her everyday classroom life and which re-made O'Brien in terms of professional identity. As a researcher she has documented and analysed her theories in action in a specific location at a particular time.

This multi-layered and highly sophisticated approach to teacher-research is incredibly valuable to the educational community as it speaks to both academics and teachers. O'Brien in fact has published widely for teachers including broad sheets, exemplars for policy and curriculum writers. She was also videotaped in action for a documentary about teaching literacy in disadvantaged schools. She authored and co-authored articles for refereed journals and has written chapters for national and international books. She has spoken (and had her work spoken about) at local, national and international conferences. It has been cited significantly in the field of language and literacy education. Locally I still regularly meet teachers who ask me if I know Jennifer O'Brien and who go on to tell me about how they have used her work. Clearly her work has had multiple catalytic effects and has been taken up in different ways.

What interests me here is the way her work demonstrates theories of practice in action and makes clear that teachers are 'social agents who orient social practice and that practice is 'a cognitive operation' (Grenfell & James, 1998 p.12). Often as Grenfell and James, following Bourdieu (1977) point out, this can result in reproduction as teachers are 'incorporate bodies who possess, indeed, are *possessed by* structural, generative schemes' which orient practice, which is in itself 'structured and tends to reproduce structures of which it is a product'. (Grenfell & James 1998 p.12, emphasis in original). Indeed a great deal of educational research concerned with justice explains how such structures work to maintain injustices for groups of students, typically with well-intentioned teachers unaware of how such inequities are produced. Indeed the teacher habitus and professional discourses may ensure that such thinking and analysis remains unconscious.

However there is relatively less research which explicitly documents and analyses what occurs when teachers work with theories of justice informing/driving their everyday practice, and even less which is conducted and authored by teachers. I am not suggesting that simply working with such theories guarantees empowering results (Weiler, 1991; Ellsworth, 1993); rather, I am interested in the possibilities of teachers researching the effects of their theorised practices over time, where those theories of practice attend to social difference, where indeed the very habitus of the teacher changes over time. Such research might directly inform/change educational theorising.

Parkin's research investigated the participation and learning of Aboriginal students in literacy lessons which were designed to be inclusive (Au 1993) and build on children's funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990), and where the pedagogies were informed by research on Aboriginal children's preferred participative repertoires (Harris & Malin 1994). As Parkin puts it, her research:

> examines how teachers and children 'talk into being' a literacy curriculum which is intended to be emancipatory and inclusive of children's home experiences, the issues they encounter, and how they deal with those issues. (Parkin , 1998, p 5)

Parkin was originally interested in how different Aboriginal children within the one class responded to the curriculum and pedagogical opportunities she and a cooperating teacher made available during two units of work. In particular she wanted to explore how (and whether) the small group situations which they had set up to enhance the participation of the children who were reluctant to speak in the whole class, were making a difference, and how (and whether) the culturally relevant and student-centred topics (pets, grandparents), allowed children to bring their funds of knowledge to bear on the school literacy tasks facing them.

Parkin audiotaped and videotaped a number of the whole class and small group situations in order that she could analyse closely how different children were participating and how she was operating as their teacher in practice. Her interrogation of her data was informed by her readings of conversational analysis and ethnomethodology, and in particular the

exemplary analysis of other literacy researchers who take the view that literacies are constructed through the everyday practices in actual classrooms (see for example Baker & Freebody 1993; Freebody, Ludwig, & Gunn et al. 1995).

At first Parkin found it difficult to consider anything from the data which she did not already know as a teacher of these children. That is, she interpreted the responses and participation of particular children as being evidence of what she had already suspected from 'being there' and from her historical knowledge and close relationships with the children. In one sense she was blind to the data before her in that her theories about these children would not allow for alternative interpretations. However, using what she had learned from conversational analysis she began to re-read the transcripts, to re-search her practice, asking different questions about what was accomplished by the extended classroom conversations between herself and the children and between the children themselves. It was not that she ignored what she already 'knew' about the children or their ways of being in class, but that she began to see them as agents with their logic and rationality, attending to their intentions and interpretations of what was going on, rather than comparing what they did and said with what she had hoped or expected they would do and say. This allowed for a very different readings of the case-study children. It also allowed Parkin to raise significant questions about theories of Aboriginal learning styles which are currently highly influential in Australia. Parkin explains her position as a teacher-researcher which allows for a localised situated and theorised account:

> While there has been much theorising about Aboriginal children, particularly about their preferred ways of learning, or learning styles, there has been little research focusing on the urban classroom, and classroom talk to investigate the assumptions underlying this theory as played out in situated practices. (Parkin 1998, p.5)

Parkin's research indicated the different ways of operating amongst the urban Aboriginal children in her classroom, including their different approaches to literacy learning and to their participation in classroom discourse. It also showed the significance of family and out-of-school relationships to the ways in which the children collaborated (or not) in the school context. It reminded her that the children as well as the teacher negotiate and construct what will count as a group. As well, Parkin's close analysis of the children's talk whilst working on the set tasks which were designed to be inclusive and allow them to use their funds of knowledge, showed paradoxically that the topics (eg 'grandparents') had been 'schooled' (and all that implies about class, gender, race and location) in ways that excluded the experiences of many children in the class.

Parkin's research was only recently completed and is yet to be published. Yet the challenges it poses to taken-for-granted best practice in Aboriginal education are considerable. Already she is making use of her working theories in her everyday practices with teachers and with students, and her school is making use of her expertise by applying for, and winning, grants to conduct their own research. A large group of teachers at the school are undertaking a professional development course in using systemic linguistics in the classroom and several have joined the teacher-researcher network. Another group are teacher-researchers on a project investigating literacy, information technologies and social justice. In this school the curriculum and pedagogical

agenda are increasingly tied to research which builds the knowledge of the teachers. It is possible to see emerging an organic teacher-researcher workforce continually theorising their practice. Parkin is one catalyst in a core group which includes the leadership teacher and other key teachers.

As was the case for O'Brien, Parkin's theorising is built on an explicit social justice agenda and she continually check the effects of her practices on those children who need most the literacies she and her colleagues can teach. They continue to scrutinise their practices to check if and how their enacted theories work for those children. If things go wrong they don't assume that either they got it wrong in practice or that they were working with incorrect theory. Such a diagnosis can lead to paralysis and/or circularity. Aware of this dilemma, Parkin refers to Garth Boomer on the necessity of working with the provisional and contingent:

> We should [not] think... so precisely on the event that we lose the name of the action... We must act in the end as if our provisional readings are correct and our action should be in the direction of what we provisionally believe to be most just, constructive and ethically defensible. (Boomer 1992, quoted in Parkin 1998 p. 239)

The task here is to re-search theorised practice in order to check *and* change what happens in specific localised institutions, how that is understood and its effects.

Images of 'practice' and relationships with practitioner research

The brief accounts above condense long term, complex and dynamic professional biographies in order to consider the question of practice and theory in teacher research. What Parkin and O'Brien do is not described by representations of practitioner research which speak of 'translating theory into practice' or 'applying theory'. Clearly, these researchers are engaged in assembling and working on repertoires of theories and inventing and re-inventing continuously reflexive practices in non-linear ways. However this is not ad hoc or eclecticism, rather it is a deliberate searching and taking-up of theoretical resources selected on the basis of ethical principles and local meaningfulness and utility.

Practitioner research is of course not always constituted in these ways. Teacher-research components may be built into the design of large-scale government funded curriculum development and assessment projects where the role of the teacher-researcher is limited to collecting pre-set data or to trialing curriculum material. Here the teacher becomes the conduit for other agents, a research assistant of sorts. Yet naming this work as 'teacher-research' implies a democratic, consultative and inquiry process with practitioners which may or may not have been undertaken. The non-problematised use of 'teacher-research' can well lead to its misuse or even abuse.

Teacher-designed action research projects may be limited in different ways; they may involve investigations of the effectiveness of various techniques or strategies, in order to improve practice. Such investigations may, or may not, make explicit use of theory. I

have no wish to set up hierarchies of practitioner research based on the density of overt theoretical references. Although my own practice in working with teacher-researchers is to connect them with theories of literacy as social practice and theories of social justice as they go about designing their research and to build the intellectual capital which counts in the educational research community. My intention here is to argue for research about teacher-research which does not presume a generic teacher-researcher with a generic relationship to theory and the production of knowledge. I am also just beginning to explore whether and how Bourdieu's theory of practice might be useful in thinking about theory/practice dilemmas as they relate to teacher-research.

Bourdieu's theory of practice suggests that 'human action is constituted through a dialectical relationship between individuals' thought and activity and the objective world' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.14). His theory explains how the habitus ensures that past experiences are dynamic and impact on present action. Yet the habitus is not static. Educational institutions for instance make a difference to the habitus of individuals. Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been very generative for thinking about the educational trajectories of students; it could also be brought to bear in theorising teachers' standpoints, practices, institutional locations and their relationships to the field of educational research.

There are many dilemmas with which I continue to struggle and which relate to the theory/practice dichotomy, as well as to my own expressed intentions of doing collaborative research with a social justice agenda. I am interested in and worried about how the theory/practice divide maps on to everyday research practice, including the division of labour in research, job descriptions and remuneration, and how such divisions are frequently gender-related. The theory/practice discourse is constitutive. It has material effects and it locks the educational research community into old models of activity and practice. Who does what in research is not a new dilemma, but in a time of competitive funding models and contract research, some names are more competitive than others in the application process. This may have little relationship to how in practice the research is enacted.

In my own area, literacy education, another question is how to build and maintain research funding which builds in time and resources for genuine teacher research, when literacy is increasingly framed as a measurable basic skill in government policy. The government emphasis on literacy outcomes translates locally to an urgent need for answers. It's difficult to talk in terms of redesigning and researching literacy curriculum based around students' cultural capital, when the literacy benchmarks count standard competencies. Yet this is exactly what we are trying to do in our collaborative research with teachers, to use theory to make the space for disruption and re-design.

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